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**Author:** Justyna Jajszczok

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*Justyna Jajszczok*

University of Silesia

## ***The Beetle, or the Revenge of Coleopteron***

It is impossible to describe the Victorian era with a single word or phrase. It could be called an age of instability as well as an age of security and both these epithets would be true and false at the same time. There is, however, little risk of oversimplification in describing the 19th century as an age of sweeping development in science. The scientific discoveries the Victorians witnessed had a deep impact on the way they perceived their world. Studies into natural sciences, geology and archaeology proved that the earth was much older and the life forms that inhabited it much more complex than had been believed before; Charles Darwin's and Alfred Russel Wallace's theories of evolution radically revised the perception of a man's place in the universe.

The changes in "professional science" were accompanied by a wave of amateur interest in natural history. According to Jim Endersby, naturalist studies were considered an inexpensive and wholesome leisure pursuit for the whole family and thus "[m]en, women and children all joined in the frantic hunt for plants, and the hedgerows were full of people cataloguing mosses, identifying ferns and pressing flowers."<sup>1</sup> However, Endersby qualifies his description, clarifying that "plants were considered especially appropriate for children and women to collect, since one could study them without having to observe animals copulating or killing each other."<sup>2</sup> Entomology, on the other hand, was considered a manly hobby because, although "bloodless," it "required the collectors to asphyxiate the butterflies they gathered."<sup>3</sup> Conversely, and to support the point of inherent contradictions within the Victorian era as regarded by

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Endersby, "Victorian Botany: An Introduction," *The Victorian Web*, accessed 24 April 2009, [www.victorianweb.org/science/botany/1.html](http://www.victorianweb.org/science/botany/1.html).

<sup>2</sup> Endersby, "Victorian Botany."

<sup>3</sup> Endersby, "Victorian Botany."

contemporary observers, Miriam Bailin recalls that one of the crafts women were encouraged to take up was taxidermy, by no means a bloodless pastime. She quotes a 1863 home handicrafts manual in which the exact procedure of stuffing a small bird is graphically described,<sup>4</sup> demonstrating that our assumptions of what may be considered an activity appropriate for ladies do not necessarily comply with the Victorian ones.

Observing and studying nature was inseparably related to nature-collecting, and the potential for collectibles appeared inexhaustible: from rocks and fossils to bones, shells, eggs, flowers, leaves, butterflies, beetles, and (stuffed) birds.<sup>5</sup> The list could continue almost *ad infinitum*, which goes to show how imaginative the collectors were. Therefore, beetle collecting as such may not be considered a unique or a particularly inventive hobby. There seems to be, however, a certain prevalence of amateur coleopterists among the Victorians and their presence in literature is more conspicuous than that of other natural collectors. This tendency may be coincidental; perhaps it was due to the fact that 19th-century coleopterology prided itself on some eminent ambassadors. For instance, both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace collected beetles.<sup>6</sup> The former even admitted in his autobiography that he actually had preferred his coleopterological interests to studies at university: “no pursuit at Cambridge was followed with nearly so much eagerness or gave me so much pleasure as collecting beetles. It was the mere passion for collecting, for I did not dissect them, and rarely compared their external characters, but got them named anyhow.”<sup>7</sup> In the same paragraph of his “Autobiography,” Darwin confesses how devoted he was to his passion: “I will give a proof of my zeal: one day, on tearing off some old bark, I saw two rare beetles, and seized one in each hand; then I saw a third and a new kind, which I could not bear to lose, so that I popped the one which I held in my right hand into my mouth. Alas! It ejected some intensely acrid fluid, which burnt my tongue so that I was forced to spit the beetle out, which was lost, as was the third one.”<sup>8</sup> This truly mouth-

<sup>4</sup> Miriam Bailin, “The New Victorians,” in: *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. Christine L. Krueger (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p. 39. The quoted instruction goes: “after taking out the entrails open a passage to the brain which must be scooped out through the mouth.”

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Dinosaur in a Haystack: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996), pp. 238–247.

<sup>6</sup> Cannon Schmitt, “Victorian Beetlemania,” in: *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, eds. Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 35–51.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Darwin, “Autobiography,” in: *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, 1887), p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Darwin, “Autobiography,” p. 50.

watering experience did not dissuade Darwin from pursuing his passion for beetle-hunting and his collecting urge may ultimately have played a key role in his professional discoveries; during his *Beagle* voyage he collected all sorts of organisms and fossils which afterwards enabled him to form and develop his theory.<sup>9</sup>

Though a pleasant and instructive leisure pursuit, nature-related collecting can also be seen as having more serious implications. All these collectibles in general, and beetles in particular, underwent the same procedure as each would be extracted from their natural surroundings and transplanted, as it were, to a man-friendly environment. In the peaceful refuge of a study, away from violent nature never ceasing to struggle for survival, each specimen could be examined with great care and without haste and then, once having been classified and labelled, locked away in a drawer or a glass cabinet. Not only would such an occupation serve the purpose of scientific organisation, but it could also be seen as a means of exerting power over nature. Once asphyxiated and laid in their glass coffins, the entomological specimens could no longer be considered part of nature, that violent element ruled by struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. A beetle on display becomes a token of man's triumph over nature and his desire to preserve the authority that might have been questioned by the scientific advances of the Victorian era.

Symbolic gestures performed in order to exert control over nature seem to have been inherent practices of science long before the uncertainties brought about by Darwinian thought. One could argue that the naming process connected with entomology-related collecting and classification served a similar purpose.<sup>10</sup> Whenever a new species of flora or fauna is found, its discoverer is granted the privilege to name it. As a vast number of such discoveries took place in the 19th century, obviously the Victorian naturalists (be they professional or amateur) were the ones who could give names to new specimens. In an action betraying the audacity of Adam, the first name-giver, they were allowed to name and order the natural world according to their wishes, in a way creating it anew. In fact, their

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<sup>9</sup> Janet Browne, *Darwin's Origin of Species: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), pp. 24–26.

<sup>10</sup> It seems impossible to mention the scientific practice of classification without referring to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*. On the naming practice in particular, he writes: "To name is at the same time to give the verbal representation of a representation, and to place it in a general table. [T]he name appears both as the point upon which all the structures of a language converge (for the name is its most secret, most closely guarded figure, the pure internal result of all its conventions, rules, and history), and as the point from which all language in general can enter into a relation with the truth according to which it will be judged." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Lodon and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 128–129.

vanity greatly exceeded that of Adam's, for quite frequently they used *their own* names to subscribe new species and retain the symbolic ownership of their discoveries. Another excerpt from Darwin's autobiography sheds some light on the charm naturalists found in their names: "No poet ever felt more delighted at seeing his first poem published than I did at seeing, in Stephens' 'Illustrations of British Insects,' the magic words, 'captured by C. Darwin, Esq.'" <sup>11</sup>

Commenting on the above passage, Cannon Schmitt notes that Darwin, so excited at seeing his name in print, fails to mention the name of the beetle for the capture of which he was granted credit. Thus, Schmitt maintains, "collecting and writing figure as interchangeable not because finding beetles is like composing poems but because both derive value from the moment of recognition provided by publication. Indeed, collecting represents an even more narcissistic activity than writing: whereas the poet delights in seeing his poem published, the collector thrills not to the picture or name of the thing caught but rather to the appearance of his own name."<sup>12</sup> It seems therefore that this practice transfers the collector and his work to another, figurative level. While an actual collection, seen as a material accumulation of objects, is subject to potential threat (be it destruction, loss or theft), the virtual collection, propagated in lexicons and textbooks, not only has the potential to "last forever" but also, by means of retaining and repeating the capturer's name, grants him the eternal ownership over it.

Motivations such as these are either vocalised or implied by avid collectors populating 19th-century fiction. They share certain traits manifested by coleopterists in real life, predominantly zealous curiosity and a sense of scientific self-importance, which tend to isolate them socially. For example, Reverend Camden Farebrother, the vicar from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) can in some way be considered a literary counterpart of Darwin. Just like the father of evolution, this "[o]ld-style natural historian"<sup>13</sup> devotes his time to investigate natural creations (and "[l]ike many an early nineteenth-century clergyman with butterfly net or excavating hammer in hand, Farebrother seems less interested in the Creator than in His creation."<sup>14</sup>). He admits with unconcealed pride that he has "made an exhaustive study of the entomology of [his] district."<sup>15</sup> Farebrother could be seen as the epitome of a Victorian coleopterist: his

<sup>11</sup> Darwin, "Autobiography," pp. 50–51.

<sup>12</sup> Schmitt, "Victorian Beetlemania," p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Postlethwaite, "George Eliot and Science," in: *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Postlethwaite, "George Eliot and Science," p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000), p. 143.

beetle collection is vast and ordered with painstaking meticulousness; he keeps his “insects ranged in fine gradation, with names subscribed in exquisite writing”<sup>16</sup> in shelves and drawers, always ready to be exhibited and admired. This, unfortunately, does not happen often. When Lydgate pays a courteous visit to see the vicar’s collection, Farebrother remarks that even his own mother “is not used to [his] having visitors who can take any interest in [his] hobbies.”<sup>17</sup> Not only does this remark suggest that Farebrother rarely entertains visitors, but also that if someone indeed pays a call, they show no interest in his beetles whatsoever. Indeed, the hobby is presented as rather hermetic and hence inaccessible and incommunicable to people uninvolved in coleopterology; what he regards as a fascinating collection of peculiar specimens, outsiders (even if these include members of his own family) think of as nothing more than “pickled vermin, and drawers full of blue-bottles and moths.”<sup>18</sup> This makes the Victorian collector, as exemplified by Farebrother, a somewhat ridiculous figure: while he wishes nothing more than to show people his treasures and make them admire his scrupulous work, others find his collection completely boring and refuse to take even a brief look at it.

A complete lack of any empathy accompanied by a great capability to bore his company stiff is presented by another literary beetle collector: the Duke from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), whom, perhaps too harshly, Cannon Schmitt calls Farebrother’s “intellectual cousin.”<sup>19</sup> The mention of his hobby appears actually only in one sentence: “On a peach-coloured divan sat Lady Narborough pretending to listen to the Duke’s description of the last Brazilian beetle that he had added to his collection”<sup>20</sup> but it seems quite enough to make some probable assumptions about him. As Schmitt writes, “Wilde figures such collecting as the most incommunicable, inconsequential, and uninteresting passion extant.”<sup>21</sup> However, there is an essential difference between Farebrother’s and the Duke’s collecting: while the former’s seems to serve a specific purpose (as the Vicar tried to systematise the flora and fauna in his district), the latter’s is just simply collecting for its own sake, something that is automatically regarded as tedious, out of date and completely devoid of any significance. The Duke embraces the features that could be seen as belonging to the passing age: his remoteness is emphasised by his boring hobby which betrays imperial connotations and appears

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 145.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Schmitt, “Victorian Beetlemania,” p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Schmitt, “Victorian Beetlemania,” p. 35.



quite archaic already at the end of the 19th century. It seems that the “antediluvianism” of the Duke’s leisure pursuit lies in the fact that it may be perceived as anachronistically *time-consuming* and hence suitable only for those people who have time on their hands and can afford to waste it. Thus, in some sense, with the inevitable advent of a new, faster era, a hobby that involves tedious meticulousness and “mastery of endless minutiae”<sup>22</sup> becomes inadequate and out of place.

Another interesting and perhaps symptomatic example of a literary coleopterist is presented in Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “The Beetle-Hunter” (1898). Its eponymous protagonist, Sir Thomas Rossiter, leads the retired life of a recluse, in which his impressive beetle collection appears the only bright spot. When he is visited by his brother-in-law and the story’s narrator, Dr Hamilton, who happens to share his interest in beetles, Dr Rossiter, like any other literary coleopterist apparently, at long last has the chance to display his opus: “He had a huge, oaken cabinet arranged in shallow drawers, and here, neatly ticketed and classified, were beetles from every corner of the earth, black, brown, blue, green, and mottled. Every now and then as he swept his hand over the lines and lines of impaled insects he would catch up some rare specimen, and, handling it with as much delicacy and reverence as if it were a precious relic, he would hold forth upon its peculiarities and the circumstances under which it came into his possession.”<sup>23</sup> Just like the previously mentioned beetle-hunters, so is Dr Rossiter ready to sacrifice a great part of his life for his passion; his health is believed to have been affected by his beetle-hunting expeditions, for, as he himself states, “my nerves are not so good as they were. My travels in search of beetles in my younger days took me into many malarious and unhealthy places.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the true scale of the deterioration of his nerves is only revealed at the end of the story when it becomes apparent that Rossiter is a dangerous lunatic capable of hammering people to death in their sleep. Annoyingly, the question of whether it was his hobby that had affected his mental state or whether it is coleopterology that attracts individuals of particular disposition, remains unresolved.

These examples of literary beetle-hunters mark a shift in the perception of entomology as a suitable leisure pursuit. While Eliot’s Farebrother is still presented as a benevolent figure whose hobby is wholesome, and if not relevant to the Middlemarch society itself, then definitely so to

<sup>22</sup> Schmitt, “Victorian Beetlemania,” p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Beetle Hunter,” in: *Tales of Terror and Mystery*, Project Gutenberg, accessed 17 Feb. 2013, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/537/537-h/537-h.htm#beetle>.

<sup>24</sup> Doyle, “The Beetle Hunter.”

the scientific world, Wilde's and Doyle's already seem to embody degenerated collectors. Neither of them seems to have scientific progress at heart (which is particularly striking in Rossiter's case as his vast collection could have contributed greatly to the science of coleopterology had he allowed access to it); on the contrary, both appear overwhelmed by the sheer urge to possess and claim as their own, desperately clinging to what Miriam Bailin calls "the promise of redemption experienced in the mute and glorious certainty of the material realm."<sup>25</sup> The vague sense of inadequacy or unease that clearly accompanies the late 19th-century coleopterists may be attributed to the fact that, as the literature proves, instead of integrating them into some sort of community (scientific or otherwise), their collections aggravate their isolation. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that their line of work bears some morbid traces. After all, it involves the careful study and examination of thousands of dead bodies – be it of beetles, but corpses nonetheless. It does not demand a vivid imagination to picture a nightmare scenario in which these asphyxiated and impaled insects rise from their glass sarcophagi, and envision a situation in which the collector is threatened by his own collection. Richard Marsh's 1897 novel *The Beetle* feeds precisely into these fears by means of a main villain in the form of an avenging coleopteron.

The readers and one of the characters, the unfortunate clerk Robert Holt, are introduced to the eponymous insect during a rainy night in a supposedly deserted house. As the first encounter happens in complete darkness, there is no possibility of distinguishing its colour (which later turns out to be jade green) or its actual size (which proves to be monstrous: "six or seven inches high, and about a foot in length"<sup>26</sup>). In a particularly vivid and disturbing scene, Holt describes his feelings of horror and repulsion as the creature begins to climb his body. "I could feel it stick. Its weight – increased as it ascended, – and it smelt! I had been for some time aware that it emitted an unpleasant, foetid odour; as it neared my face it became so intense as to be unbearable. [...] It reached my chin, it touched my lips, – and I stood still and bore it all, while it enveloped my face with its huge, slimy, evil-smelling body, and embraced me with its myriad legs" (452). The description is so suggestive not only because of the fantastic nature of the beetle but also because both its and Holt's behaviours strike us as peculiar: a man passively suffering a disgusting embrace from a multilegged, mucous monster. What is perhaps even

<sup>25</sup> Bailin, "The New Victorians," p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Marsh, "The Beetle," in: *Victorian Villainies*, eds. Graham and Hugh Greene (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 546. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the main text in parentheses.



more interesting, however, is the realisation that in this scene a complete reversal of conventional roles is taking place. In a truly inventive way, Marsh has the reader witness a situation in which at long last the beetle is the active examiner of an immobile and powerless man.

The reason Holt is unable to do what every other person would, i.e. to shake the creature off, is because he is mesmerised into complete petrification by an unnamed foreigner who appears to possess one of “those morbid organisations which are oftener found, [...], in the east than in the west, and which are apt to exercise an uncanny influence over the weak and the foolish folk with whom they come in contact” (502). Holt later describes the experience of being under this potent control thus: “I turned round, mechanically, like an automaton. Such passivity was worse than undignified; it was galling; I knew that well. I resented it with secret rage. But in that room, in that presence, I was invertebrate” (453). The mesmerist is evidently able to control the gigantic beetle and has the power to turn humans into beetle-like creatures: completely passive in the hands of a higher authority. Furthermore, the expression “invertebrate” is key here; not only does it refer to insect-like animals, but also implies the specific trait of people who happen to find themselves under the mesmerist’s influence. Another word for “invertebrate” is “spineless” and this is exactly the allegation present in the novel: the ones most likely to become the victims of the mesmeric foreigner are cowardly people whose backbone – especially their *moral* backbone – is somehow degenerated.

In *The Beetle*, the victims of the malignant mesmerist are also people who in one way or another may expect what they receive. Mr Holt finds himself in the hypnotist’s grip only after having committed burglary. In the case of Paul Lessingham, who is the primary object of the foreigner’s interest and resentment, this implication is even stronger. Although at first sight he seems a perfect man, being sometimes even referred to as “Paul the Apostle” (495) and a respected member of parliament (and obviously, also engaged to a pretty English lady), it is revealed that he does keep a few skeletons in his closet. At some point in the novel, he confesses his crime: as a foolish eighteen-year-old, Lessingham found himself ensnared by an attractive Egyptian lady. Against good advice, he ventured into a forbidden district of Cairo, where on a whim, he entered a suspicious café which could as well have been a brothel and demanded entertainment. Instead, however, he was served the most horrid of nightmares, which left him mentally scarred for life. The Egyptian temptress, also referred to as the woman of the songs (which suggests her siren intentions), turned out to be the follower of the ancient cult of Isis which happened to offer human sacrifice, preferably in the form of pretty

English ladies. When he eventually managed to escape, this infuriated the seductress to such an extent that she swore revenge for his betrayal. Her motives may of course be questionable – but so seems Lessingham’s reputation. Unlike the Victorian coleopterists, then, the exotic foreigner figuratively impales only those human specimens that in a way deserve their fate, and, as the action progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult not to understand some of her vindictiveness.

Late in the course of the novel we learn that the beautiful woman of the songs, the hideous mesmerist, and the jade green beetle are actually one and the same being. It is due to the fact that for a long time the gender of the villain remains indeterminate and through such terms as “the unbaptized Mohammedan” (504), “imprecatory fanatic” (544), “that Arab party” (668) or “dirty foreigner” (666) we are led to believe that he is in fact a man. During the first encounter with the Egyptian, Holt refers to this gender ambiguity thus: “I saw someone in front of me lying in a bed. I could not at once decide if it was a man or a woman. Indeed at first I doubted if it was anything human. But, afterwards, I knew it to be a man, – for this reason, if for no other, that it was impossible such a creature could be feminine” (453). The decision Holt makes in regard to the mesmerist’s gender is based on convention, namely traditional Victorian gender roles. Since the persecutor exhibits power and excessive cruelty, he must be a man.

The true nature of the mesmerist is only apparent in the scene of the spectacular revelation, i.e. when Sydney Atherton, a friend and rival of Lessingham’s, but primarily a scientist, witnesses the transformation of the Egyptian into the beetle. “[T]he moment [the man disappeared], the creature began to dwindle, and so rapidly that, in a couple of seconds at most, a little heap of drapery was lying on the floor, on which was a truly astonishing example of the coleoptera. [...] Beyond doubt it was a lamellicorn, one of the *copridae*. With the one exception of its monstrous size, there were the characteristics in plain view; – the convex body, the large head, the projecting clypeus. More, *its smooth head and throat seemed to suggest that it was a female*” (546–547).<sup>27</sup> When Atherton tries to capture it, the gigantic insect transforms again: “within eighteen inches of me, that beetle swelled and swelled, until it had assumed its former portentous dimensions, when, as it seemed, it was enveloped by a human shape, and in less time than no time, there stood in front of me, naked from top to toe, my truly versatile oriental friend. One startling fact nudity revealed, – that I had been egregiously mistaken on the question of sex. My visitor was not a man, but a woman, and, judging from the

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<sup>27</sup> Emphasis mine.

brief glimpse which I had of her body, by no means old or ill-shaped either" (547).

Having witnessed the Egyptian's naked body and realised its *surprising lack of deformity*, Atherton immediately switches registers; while before the reveal he referred to the person as an "inspired maniac" (544) or "imprecatory fanatic" (544), after he has referred to her as "my truly versatile oriental friend." Not only is the woman suddenly called a gentler name, but also automatically claimed as "his," which in a way echoes practices of the 19th-century beetle-collectors. On the one hand, the creature whose versatility both fascinates and inspires awe almost begs for further examination, inspection and classification. On the other, however, the way in which the male characters struggle and fail to name the foreigner can be read as their urge to exert their control over the exotic creature. As Atherton's example shows, naming is claiming, an automatic action, it seems, towards interesting insects as well as women. The more surprising, therefore, must be the realisation of the impotency of their attempts. In consequence, in the course of the novel we encounter a number of descriptive terms associated with the villainess but we never learn her true name – or indeed, never observe any success in taming her.

Apart from her shape-shifting capacity, the Egyptian mesmerist evokes terror because of her foreign, *unhomely* nature which does not seem to comply with any rules and constantly defies conventions. She is, as Canon Schmitt puts it, "an embodiment of exotic and feminized evil."<sup>28</sup> Read thus, *The Beetle*, just like other late-19th-century narratives such as Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), feeds into late Victorian fears of foreign invasion and contamination. In particular, these novels are about a single stranger who comes to London and viciously attacks the capital's community. In general, such an invader symbolises the assailment of an exotic, uncontrollable power, almost like a disease which may spread rapidly, and take a great toll.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, *The Beetle* may be regarded as a typical Gothic story of the late-Victorian period, a literary expression of discourses of disease and infection (here in their exotic variation), combined with the decline of imperial potency and universal fears of human degeneration.

<sup>28</sup> Schmitt, "Victorian Beetlemania," p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986). An interesting account of this social trend in relation to infection may be found in Kristie Blair, "Contagious Sympathies: George Eliot and Rudolf Virchow," in: *Unmapped Countries: Biological Visions in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, ed. Anne-Julia Zwierlein (London: Anthem Press, 2005), pp. 145–154.

Yet, Marsh's novel stands out from other invasion narratives. In a unique manner, *The Beetle* employs, not one but three different sources of fear to arrive at a threat that can be seen as both unexpected and at the same time predictable. Compared to *Dracula*, Marsh's tale offers a new quality of the uncanny. As a character, Count Dracula matches rather comfortably the Victorian conventions of a villain: an exotic shape-shifter who mesmerises women into fatal submission and who plans to take over the civilised world. *The Beetle*, on the other hand, disrupts such expectations. At the core of the novel lies a truly terrifying possibility that the sense of political, ideological and masculine security that Victorian Englishmen possessed might simply be false. The narrative suggests a nightmare scenario in which they are attacked and reduced to hysterical cowards by forces whose presence they have believed to be either non-existent or long squashed. The fact that their assailant takes the shape of an Egyptian *ladybug* is the more frightful as it combines the three great unimaginations: not only are they being punished by a foreigner (for which they might have been prepared) but – more importantly – by an unexpectedly potent female and an apparently unconquered token of the natural world. The Arab coleopteron acts as an agent of revenge: primarily for betrayed love but ultimately for years of exploitation, in that she is avenging hundreds of thousands members of her family whose dead bodies are kept by arrogant collectors in their glass cabinets and displays. Thus, the figure of the Egyptian avengeress serves two purposes: she torments her victims in retribution for attempting to tame and rule over nature, but also proves how illusory is the power these beetle-filled showcases are supposed to represent.

Justyna Jajszczok

#### ***The Beetle* albo zemsta chrząszcza**

#### **Streszczenie**

Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest naukowe i literackie przedstawienie chrząszcza – owada, który w XIX wieku znajdował się w kręgu zainteresowań zarówno zawodowych entomologów, jak i przyrodników-amatorów. Motyw chrząszcza w artykule jest odczytywany w dwójnasób: z jednej strony traktowany jest on jako obiekt kolekcjonerski, czyli również jako symbol pozornego triumfu człowieka nad niekontrolowanymi siłami natury. W literaturze natomiast, a zwłaszcza w późnowiktoriańskiej gotyckiej powieści Richarda Marsha *The Beetle*, chrząszcz staje się literackim narzędziem zemsty, za pomocą którego natura bierze odwet na ludziach usiłujących ją okiełznać.

Justyna Jajszczok

***The Beetle* oder die Rache des Käfers**

Zusammenfassung

Das Thema des vorliegenden Essays ist eine wissenschaftliche und literarische Darstellung des Käfers – eines Insektes, das sich im 19. Jahrhundert im Interessenbereich sowohl der Profientomologen, als auch der Hobbynaturforscher befand. Das Käfermotiv ist hier auf zweierlei Weise angesehen: einerseits als ein Sammelgegenstand, also auch als ein Symbol des scheinbaren Triumphes des Menschen über unkontrollierte Naturkräfte. In der Literatur dagegen, vor allem in dem spätviktorianischen gotischen Roman *The Beetle* von Richard Marsh, wird ein Käfer zum Rachewerkzeug, mit dessen Hilfe die Natur an den sie bändigenden Menschen Rache nimmt.